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Viewing cable 08PARIS1855, MARCH 14 SHOOTS ITSELF IN FOOT DURING ELYSEE VISIT

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 08PARIS1855 | 2008-10-08 10:11 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | SECRET | Embassy Paris |

Appears in these articles:

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2023
TAGS: [FR](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MARCH 14 SHOOTS ITSELF IN FOOT DURING ELYSEE VISIT

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, reas
ons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: A March 14th delegation led by Lebanese MP Marwan Hamadeh that met October 2 with senior French officials may have done more harm than good, at least so far as relations with the Elysee are concerned. "What world are they living in?" Boris Boillon, Counselor for Middle East Affairs at the Elysee, wondered as he listened to Hamadeh express March 14th's concerns to French NSA-equivalent Jean-David Levitte. Boillon's negative impression was sealed when Hamadeh alluded to the possibility that the French and Syrian armies were collaborating on a plan for the Syrian re-occupation of Lebanon. Turning to Syria, Boillon described several signs of possible progress by Syria, including indications that Damascus will soon name an ambassador to Beirut, and assurances from Qatar that Gilad Shalit received a letter entrusted by his father to President Sarkozy. End summary.

March 14 Makes a Hash of It

¶2. (S) PolMin/C and NEA Watcher met with Boris Boillon, President Sarkozy's advisor for the Middle East and North Africa, October 7 at the Elysee. Boillon provided a readout on the October 2 meeting between MP Marwan Hamadeh, the head of a March 14 delegation that included Suleiman Franjeh, Dory Chamoun and Fares Sayed, and Jean-David Levitte, President Sarkozy's NSA-equivalent. Recapping developments over the last few months in Franco-Syrian relations, Boillon said he and Levitte reassured Hamadeh that "everything we have done is to ensure the security and independence of Lebanon" and that the French have provided Damascus with a clear road map, with benchmarks, for measuring Syrian performance. They stressed that it was "out of the question" for Syrian troops on the Lebanese border to violate Lebanon's sovereignty, and said that if Damascus were to try anything foolish it would face a "strong international coalition" arrayed against it. Boillon recalled that during his visit to Damascus, Sarkozy made clear to President Asad that France would improve relations with Syria "step-by-step" but only so long as Syria honored its commitments and respected two key principles: the independence of Lebanon and the need for the International Tribunal on the Hariri assassination. Finally, in response to an apparent concern expressed by Hamadeh, the two Frenchmen reassured him that the Elysee had no intention of trying to reshape Lebanon's political leadership.

¶3. (S) While Hamadeh reportedly left reassured, the visit seems to have further soured the Elysee on the March 14th movement. Boillon, who met separately with the entire group, expressed incredulity at the "stupid ideas" ("I'm sorry, but there's no other word for them") which had seized the delegation's imagination. Hamadeh apparently alluded at one point to rumors that the French and Syrian armies are collaborating on a plan for the Syrian military to reassert control over Lebanon. "What world are they living in? Either they're joking or they're truly crazy," Boillon thought to himself at the time. Boillon accused March 14th of living in a fantasy world fueled by a rumor-mongering Lebanese press, much of which is sympathetic to the Lebanese opposition. "Of course the opposition is going to claim that France is backing them, that's part of the game," said Boillon, who insisted that the March 14th leadership should be smart enough not to believe such tripe. But the reality, he lamented, is that March 14th is part and parcel of a political culture mired in navel-gazing and paranoia.

Signs of Syrian Progress?

¶4. (S) On a more positive note, Boillon recounted several encouraging signs with respect to Syrian behavior. First he said that the French have received "proof," in the form of assurances from the Qataris that the French have no reason to question, that captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit received a letter entrusted by his father to President Sarkozy, and that the Emir of Qatar later conveyed to Hamas politburo chief Khalid Mishal. However, Boillon acknowledged that

negotiations for Shalit's release have stalled; he suggested that Cairo was having difficulty finding a formula that would satisfy Hamas and yet would not be exploited by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Second, Boillon said the French had indications that later this month or in early November Damascus would name its ambassador to Lebanon, thereby making an exchange of ambassadors before the end of this year a genuine possibility. Third, Boillon noted that the GOL and the SARG had recently exchanged lists of prisoners as a first step towards the possible release and repatriation of Lebanese political prisoners held by Syria. Finally, Boillon said that a joint GOL-SARG commission on border demarcation had decided to move forward on mapping all areas of dispute with the exception of the Sheba Farms.

No Informal Talks With Hamas

15. (S) Boillon (protect) dismissed a recent statement by FM Kouchner in which Kouchner averred that France had no official contacts with Hamas, but that the MFA received information about Hamas from French NGOs active in Gaza. "He should have simply said 'no official contacts and left it at that' said Boillon. (Note: Kouchner's comments also earned a stern rebuke on October 7 from his former NGO, Medecins Sans Frontieres, which accused the FM of sowing confusion and jeopardizing the security of NGO teams working with the Palestinian population.)

Comment

16. (S) Given the dramatic about-face in French policy towards Syria since the end of the Chirac administration, March 14's insecurity about the Elysee's thinking is understandable if not inevitable. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that Hamadeh struck so many wrong notes during his meeting with Levitte, as his performance will not make it any easier for March 14 to find a receptive ear in Sarkozy's circle of advisors. Fortunately, the delegation left a more favorable impression at the MFA. Ludovic Pouille (MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant) told us that he found Hamadeh's message "better than expected" and noted that the delegation took pains to avoid any hint of disappointment with the sea change in French policy and instead focused on depicting March 14 as a confident, united movement destined to win next year's parliamentary elections.

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